

Mark 14:53-72

When interviewed before a match, noted philosopher Mike Tyson, said, “Everyone has a plan until they are punched in the face.” Tyson puts his finger on a broad truth. How often do we have these great intentions and make grand plans, only to quickly abandon them when the circumstances of life punch us in the face? Perhaps at one time you joined a City Group, convinced of the need and value of authentic community, and you were going to be real and deeply invest in the lives of those around you...and then you encountered a difficult personality or felt the group didn’t share a lot of your characteristics and you feel like you can’t relate, and now you find yourself only checking in occasionally? Maybe at one time you were fired up to connect with your neighbors and devoted to the idea of serving the poor and marginalized in the city...but then work started to get busy and, all these awesome bands have been playing downtown and, well, you know how it goes? Or maybe you had dreamed about all the fun, thoughtful, and romantic things you would do for your spouse and how wonderful your married life would be...but now money is tight and the kids can never seem to sleep for more than a couple of hours and even basic communication with your spouse is a chore?

Today we are going to look at the arrest and trial of Jesus and how two men - Peter and Jesus - react to being punched in the face.

When we first encounter Peter at the beginning of this passage, life had just delivered him a devastating uppercut to the jaw. It is still before dawn and he is standing in the courtyard of the High Priest, Caiaphas, while the recently arrested Jesus is held inside, facing intense questioning. Peter’s heart is pounding and his head is likely spinning as he warms his hands by the fire outside, surrounded by the high priest’s servants and guards, trying to orient himself and figure out what to do next. It was just the night before that Peter was enjoying the Passover meal with Jesus and his fellow disciples, where at the end of that meal, Jesus told his disciples they would all leave him. Peter protested, declaring: “**even though they all fall away, I will not**” and when Jesus insisted that Peter would deny him three times that very night, Peter emphatically reiterated “**If I must die with you, I will not deny you.**” [Mark 14:29-31] Peter started with a noble plan to stay by Jesus’ side, even through adversity, but as we’re about to see, circumstances are about to punch him in the face.

It was just hours before that Peter was praying with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, but couldn’t stay awake. Who could blame him? It was late. Then, suddenly Jesus woke him up and the next thing Peter knew, a crowd with swords and clubs materialized and moved in to arrest Jesus. Enraged and impulsive, Peter drew a short sword he had hidden under his tunic and lunged at Malchus, the nearest guard, cutting his ear off. Jesus, on the other hand, doesn’t resist them the least bit, allowing himself to be arrested. Immediately, all the remaining disciples fled, but Peter followed Jesus at a distance and gained access to the courtyard.

At this point, Peter had a lot on the line. He knew that his teacher and leader had been seized and arrested by an angry mob and had been accused and questioned by some very

influential and powerful people. If those people knew that Peter was one of Jesus' followers, Peter might have been facing the same scrutiny. In addition, Peter knew he had just committed a violent act in front of a multitude of witnesses, and could face imprisonment or possibly death if caught. The challenge to Peter's plan worsens...

Peter encounters a servant girl of the high priest, who tells Peter that he was with Jesus. Peter immediately denies it, and you can sense his blood pressure rise a bit. Not liking the question, he changes location and goes out to the gateway. The servant girl sees him again, only this time she addresses the bystanders around Peter, telling them that Peter was with Jesus. Again, a fearful Peter denies knowing Jesus, as the knot in his stomach tightens. Finally, as we learn in the account in John, about an hour later a relative of Malchus, the man Peter stabbed in the head with his sword, accuses Peter of being one of Jesus' disciples. This time, a frantic Peter scrambles for the most convincing rhetorical device he can think of, and he calls down a curse on himself swearing, "I do not know Jesus!" Invoking a curse was the equivalent of saying, "may God strike me dead if I'm lying". This kind of language may not be cause for much alarm in our modern culture, but in Peter's day calling down this kind of curse on yourself was a drastic move, and thus highly persuasive. People really believed God had the power to curse. Then, after all this, Peter hears the rooster crow and he realizes what he has done. **Peter had a great plan, but when life punched him in the face, he quickly abandoned his plan serve Jesus in order to preserve himself.**

In the same passage, taking place at the exact same time that Peter is in the courtyard, the camera cuts to Jesus - quite literally - being punched in the face. He is standing before the Sanhedrin, which was the judicial body that had the authority to settle disputes and interpret Jewish law at the time. It was supposed to be a justice seeking body made up of learned and respected men in the community, but on this occasion it was rigged with partiality. For all intents and purposes, this is a hastily thrown together kangaroo court.

It is important to pause here for a moment and reflect on the humanity of Jesus. Jesus was fully God, but also fully human, and as such he felt the same frailties of human flesh, the same human emotions as you and me and was able to be tempted just as we are. We do ourselves a disservice if, as we consider the actions of Jesus in this passage, we simply conclude that Jesus was just above it all and patiently waiting for time to pass until the mockery of a trial was complete. This isn't the case. Jesus felt things just as any person would. He would have felt that innate impulse for fairness that all humans seem to have - after all, you don't have to teach a 2 year old the concept of "that's not fair" - would have been shared by Jesus.

With that in mind, consider the scene Jesus was facing. According to Jewish law, for any charge to stick, the testimony of two people had to agree. In the haste to arrest and try Jesus, the chief priests had neglected to see to it that witnesses had synched up their stories. As a result, person after person stood before the court and lied, accusing Jesus of things he didn't do. One of the witnesses claims he heard Jesus say, **"I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another not made with hands" [Mark 14:58]** This is

twisting of Jesus' words. What Jesus actually said is found in **John 2:19, "destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up"**. You can see how his words were taken out of context and twisted. Jesus never threatened to destroy the temple himself, nor would he have. Jesus was talking about the temple as his body, and he would never say he was going to destroy his own body. How do you typically respond when someone makes up lies about you? or maliciously twists your words? How do you think you would respond if someone made up those lies under oath in a courtroom with your life on the line? As many of you know, I'm a lawyer and am frequently in court. Having done a few thousand hearings by now, I can confidently tell you that people really don't like having lies told about them, and they really don't like feeling like their words are being twisted, and in my experience they go to great lengths arguing, lashing out, and protesting their innocence. Yet, curiously, Jesus does none of those things here. If you read through the gospels, you'll see that Jesus has a track record of engaging these priests and scribes verbally and escaping traps they set for him. Jesus could have done the same thing here, but despite having much material to work with, *Jesus remains quiet*.

As the allegations being levied against Jesus fail to be corroborated, and thus fail to stick, the High Priest, Caiaphas, begins to be frustrated. He is presiding as the judge over the entire proceeding and he is eager to see Jesus put to death. Caiaphas' frustration finally boils over. Making a mockery of the process, the judge assumes the role of prosecutor as Caiaphas lashes out at Jesus, asking him directly, **"are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?"** To which Jesus responds, **"I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven"** [Mark 14:61-62] What is interesting about Jesus' answer is how full, and decidedly inconvenient it is for him. Jesus didn't continue to remain silent. He didn't answer with a simple yes, but decline to provide details. He didn't answer in a way that backed down and submitted to Caiaphas' religious authority. Unlike Peter, Jesus answered fully, knowingly sealing his fate.

With Jesus' answer, Caiaphas erupts with a rush of emotion, tearing his ornate garments as he bellows for Jesus to be condemned to death. Observing this scene must have been particularly exasperating for Jesus. As he gazes at Caiaphas, he sees the high priest, an office ordained by God that goes back to Aaron, the brother of Moses with a long heritage in Jewish law and culture. The high priest operated as the mediator, the go between, for God and his people. The high priest went through extensive rituals meant to purify himself and the people and to present them as acceptable to God. Jesus stands there knowing that he is the true high priest, and to save rotten men like Caiaphas, he must suffer his ridicule and power-grabbing. Jesus had every right to call down fire on this corrupt High Priest, but he didn't. He voluntarily let go of his rights.

Having now taken a few minutes to examine the conduct of both Peter and Jesus as circumstances came and punched them in the face, the differences between the two are obvious. Peter is consumed with himself and his own regard, and he starts making choices designed to minimize any pain or risk. Jesus acts in a much more puzzling manner, laying down his rights and forsaking his own personal welfare. How do we account for this?

The answer is found in the Garden of Gethsemane. **And he [Jesus] took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch. And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” [Mark 14:33-36]**

Here, the humanity of Jesus is on full display. He is greatly distressed and troubled. His soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Why is he feeling this way? I used to think the answer was obvious, that he knows he is about to be arrested, beaten, and tortured hanging on the cross. I mean, who wouldn't be extremely distressed at the idea of being executed? I remember watching Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* back when it came out and being amazed and horrified at the physicality of what crucifixion looked like. But, let's be honest, many people endured crucifixion. Jesus isn't unique in that. What, then, makes Jesus suffering unique? What makes Jesus unique - and what truly makes his soul sorrowful - lies in the spiritual realm. From the beginning of time, Jesus had known nothing but perfect love and community with God, the Father, and the Holy Spirit. He enjoyed perfection in this relationship. Even walking the Earth in human form, Jesus had not sinned and enjoyed relationship with God. Now, the reality of what is imminent is hitting Jesus. *Jesus isn't so much concerned about the physical pain, he is anguished over the fact that he is about to face fierce separation from the Father by enduring the wrath of God.* It is natural to read these verses and try to relate to what Jesus is feeling, perhaps by thinking of something you were dreading and multiplying it by a kajillion. But even that doesn't do it justice. The great distress Jesus is feeling here is something we, quite literally, cannot fathom - though it is something we deserve, and is worth contemplating.

In this distress, Jesus goes and prays, wanting communion with God. He pleads for the cup to be removed from him. The cup is a metaphor commonly used in Scripture for the wrath of God. Jesus knows that a perfect, holy, righteous, and just God cannot let sin go unpunished. Sin entered the world, and God's wrath needed to be poured out in judgment against that sin. He knew the plan was for him to enter the world and absorb that wrath, but as the reality of that event is breathing down his neck, he cries out to God, asking if there is another way. As he addresses God, he does so with profound intimacy and profound reverence. He knows that all things are possible with God, that the plan could be changed, but he also trusts and submits to God, wanting God's will to reign supreme.

Think of how agonizing this must have been for God. I'm a father of two little boys, and I have a hard enough time saying no when they ask for candy. I simply cannot fathom the idea of freely offering one of my sons to die in place of anyone, let alone one of my enemies. I especially can't fathom what it would be like to have my son, full of sorrow and anguish, pleading with me to not go through with it...and still deciding to do so. And even this comparison fails, as I am thinking in terms of human love and not the perfect, divine love shared by God and Jesus. That God, even in hearing the repeated prayers of Jesus in the garden, wills pour the cup of wrath on Jesus, and Jesus' willingness to submit and receive the cup of wrath, demonstrates powerfully just how

much God the Father and Jesus our Lord loves us.

This fixation of Jesus on God's will is what explains his conduct during his arrest and trial before Caiaphus. So why did Jesus stay faithful to God's will? In short, he trusted the supreme will and plan of God. This trust wasn't only an rational trust, something he simply needed to remind himself of time and again. This trust also came about after time on his knees in prayer, seeking God, connecting to God, trusting God. Because of this trust--actual fellowship with the Father--when the circumstances around Jesus came to punch him in the face, he knew intimately the goodness of the Father and trusted him. As a result he was free to follow the God's will, not respond by wildly punch back in the flesh, the way we saw with Peter.

So how does this play out in our own lives? Perhaps some of us are ensnared in things we know are not God's will for us. Maybe it is a relationship with someone you know is not right, or a living situation you know is unhealthy, or perhaps an addiction to something that is taking the rightful place of God in your life. You didn't plan to end up here, but life sometimes feels out of control and you just don't have the strength in you to change. You need to ask yourself - do you trust God? Do you trust his will in your life? This is the same God who loves you enough to pour out his wrath on Jesus, instead of you. In doing so, He already solved your biggest problem - your separation from God because of your sin. Do you trust him and the goodness of his will for all the lesser problems in life? This needs to be wrestled with honestly on your knees in prayer, and out in the open in your communities.

For others of us, the issue isn't so much an actual awareness of acting outside of God's will, so much as just living without considering God's will, or having lost sight of God's will. We need to have our eyes refocused on God's will, and our spines stiffened for whatever living that out entails. I was recently treated to a beautiful illustration of this point in my city group. A couple in the group, Jon and Naomi Hauser, are foster parents. Jon and Naomi entered into it desiring to love on and care for vulnerable children with a Christlike love, a wonderful plan. However, as you might imagine, fostering is fraught with circumstances punching you in the face, and Jon and Naomi felt the hardships and struggles of dealing with the bureaucracy, the bad communication and lack of support from the agency. They struggled and questioned whether it was worth it to keep the kids, and they shared it with the group as we prayed and processed with them. After a week or two of wrestling, they shared with the group that they were going to keep the kids. In explaining, Naomi said, "At the end of the day, we just felt that it was God's will for us to keep the kids, and if it is God's will to do so then that means you have to lay down some rights." That is exactly right. The progression here is important. Jon and Naomi were cognizant of God's will, and their decisions and actions flowed from that. Understand, that will mean having to lay down some rights. You may be treated poorly. You may need to allow others to misunderstand you. You may endure great loss. But God's will is supreme, and God's will is worth clinging to when life punches you in the face. It is worth it. Communities will be transformed, as we follow God's will to push through temptations to withdraw and lovingly engage in the mess of each other's lives. Our city will be transformed, as we follow God's will and shake off the allure of leisure and busyness and joyfully serve as we've been served. Our marriages will be transformed, as we

lay down our rights and expectations and are freed to love and serve our spouses. It is worth it!
YES!

I had to learn this lesson the hard way. About ten years ago I was part of a small church plant in Brooklyn. The plant team consisted of 12 people - 5 couples, myself, and a girl named Mary (not her real name). Mary and I were great friends and spent a lot of time together. I didn't like her "that way" and took great and deliberate care, in my mind, to avoid signaling otherwise. As I soon came to find out, Mary didn't pick up what I was putting down and had developed feelings for me. When she found out that I did not share the same feelings, Mary became absolutely livid. She couldn't stand to even look at me, let alone be in the same room as me. She lashed out and said some untrue, hurtful things about me. This being a small church, this rift was observed and felt. Our pastor arranged a meeting with both of us. We three met in a coffee shop, and Mary was invited to share her perspective on what happened. As I sat there listening to the hostility and anger pouring out, I was calmly and patiently mentally cataloguing all numerous exaggerations, erroneous assumptions, and flat out lies. To be truly honest, I felt proud of myself for staying calm, not interrupting and being argumentative, and keeping my body language neutral. When Mary was finished, the pastor turned to me and invited me to respond. In my most lawyerly like tone, I began to systematically correct the record of lies made against me. The pastor quickly stopped me, which greatly frustrated me. He told me I didn't need to go defend my reputation. Because Jesus died in my place, I didn't need to fixate and defend my reputation. The truth was I was more broken than I knew and yet more forgiven, in Christ, than I could imagine. It was no longer about me and my rights to be free from having my reputation slandered. I was freed to pursue God's will in the situation. God's will right there was for me to love my sister in Christ, who was clearly angry and hurting and, yes, sinning against me. God's will was for me to let the 98% of what Mary said that was untrue pass without comment, and focus on the 2% that was true and seek her forgiveness for not doing more to guard her heart. In doing so, I was (reluctantly, at the time) following the example of Jesus before Caiaphus, voluntarily laying down my rights to follow the will of God.

In closing, I wanted to go back to where we left Peter for a moment. I don't want everyone to leave here today resolving to be less like Peter and more like Jesus. That certainly isn't a bad thing, and it is important to strive toward being more Christlike in all we do. But Jesus isn't just an example to emulate, he is a Savior to be worshipped. When we last saw Peter, he was a broken man. After denying Jesus a third time, he breaks down weeping as all the memories come flooding. He remembers his bravado in declaring that he would never abandon Jesus, and feels disgust and shame. He knows that he left his best friend, the person he loved most in life, to face the horror and injustice of his trial alone. Perhaps above all, Peter is reeling at what he brought upon himself when he called down a curse on himself. If you remember, I spoke earlier of how Peter invited the curse of God on himself should he be lying about his not knowing Jesus. In lying, of course, he brought the curse down on himself, irrevocably separating himself from God. In the span of a few hours, Peter thinks that he went from being one of Jesus' closest friends to being cursed and separated from God. The level of despair and self condemnation he must have been feeling was staggering, and he brought it all on himself. What Peter didn't fully appreciate at the time, however, is that at the exact time he was sitting in his brokenness, Jesus,

the innocent one, knew he was going to be the curse so that Peter, and each one us who is just like him, would not have to suffer the effects of the curse we all call down on ourselves. Let us soak in this staggering truth, and let it provoke in us deep gratitude and joy, and let us respond in adoration!